

TITLE

BOOK REVIEW: Neil Messer, *Respecting Life: Theology and Bioethics* (London: SCM Press, 2011)

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Neil Messer, *Respecting Life: Theology and Bioethics* (London: SCM Press, 2011), xi + 236 pp., £15.00 (Pb), ISBN 978-0-334-043333-1.

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The challenge for moral theology is to be robust in moral analysis at the same time as properly theological in methodology. In relation to this challenge, roughly speaking, Roman Catholic and Reformed theology tend to suffer from opposite weaknesses. Roman Catholic moralists typically engage in very detailed analysis of moral problems, but tend to draw on natural law philosophy rather than on revealed theology. Reformed theologians more frequently draw on theology rather than on philosophy, but often their ethical conclusions are lacking in detail or specificity. There is an irony of terminology here. In Roman Catholic thought the discipline is called moral *theology*, though frequently it is hardly theological at all, whereas the same discipline in Reformed theology is termed Christian *ethics*, though frequently it is weak precisely in its ethical analysis.

The challenge for Roman Catholic moral theologians is therefore to be more properly theological (and there are some who rise to this challenge, the late Pope John Paul II prominent among them). The challenge for Reformed Christian ethicists is to show how theological themes and arguments can be applied with sufficient rigour and consistency to indicate specific practical actions, rules or policies. Neil Messer, a theologian within the United Reformed Church, succeeds substantially in this regard. This is due in no small measure to Messer's acknowledged debt to theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, Oliver O'Donovan and Michael Banner, and behind them Karl Barth. Through Hauerwas, Messer also engages with the philosophical thought of Alasdair MacIntyre, and behind him, Thomas Aquinas. Messer also has a background in molecular biology, and hence has the ability to engage comfortably with seemingly esoteric proposals such as the creation of human-nonhuman admixed embryos. He is able to address the issue of using nonhuman animals in biomedical research with a rare combination of theological depth and practical experience. Christian ethics is an admixed discipline and Christian

bioethics doubly so, and it relies on rare individuals like a Neil Messer to negotiate this complex interdisciplinary territory.

The approach of the book is first to set out a theological methodology (in the introduction and chapters 1 and 2) and then to apply this to various concrete bioethical issues, or as Messer terms them, 'engagements' (in the remaining six chapters). The areas these cover are: human reproductive cloning; embryonic stem cells and human admixed embryos; the virtues of science and medicine; the moral status of nonhuman animals; healthcare resource allocation; and assisted dying.

The methodology may be thought of as both negative or critical and positive or synthetic. On the negative side Messer offers a critique of the worldview within which contemporary bioethical issues are framed. He argues that an important contribution of Christian theology to bioethics is helping to reframe the issues. Messer's first target is the 'Baconian Project' (referring to Francis Bacon) of seeing the relief of suffering as 'an *over-riding* good' (p. 27 emphasis in the original) to which science and technology are and ought to be directed. This Project informs what Messer characterises as a false dichotomy between public and private, where scientific rationality and the relief of suffering are public goods whereas religion is a private non-rational preference. Messer has no difficulty showing how this way of framing the question determines the conclusions that shape public policy, and explains why, at the same time, the moral arguments seem interminable.

On the positive side, Messer draws on Barth and on Dietrich Bonhoeffer to suggest five diagnostic questions that can facilitate Christian moral discernment. These questions are:

1. *Is the project a way of acting that conforms to the imago dei, or an attempt to be 'like God' (sicut deus) in the sense promised by the serpent in the story of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3.5)?* (page 37)
2. *What attitude does the project manifest towards the material world (including our own bodies)?* (page 38)
3. *What attitude does the project embody towards our neighbour?* (page 40)

4. *Is the project good news to the poor, the powerless, those who are oppressed or marginalized in any way?* (page 41)
5. *What attitude does the project manifest towards past failures?* (page 42)

In fact, the engagement chapters are diverse and these questions are only used in chapters three, four and six. In contrast chapters five and seven appeal to the concept of virtue and are much more philosophical in focus, and chapter eight is effectively a critique of appeals to autonomy and to compassion in relation to assisted dying. These differences show that the origin of the book (evident from the acknowledgements) is more complex than is implied by a simple scheme of methodology and application. It is as if the chapters retain the literary traces of their distinct evolutionary history. The methodology is not applied uniformly and the 'engagements' do not all belong to the same category. Some engagements, such as the discussion of virtue in science, characterise many forms of activity whereas others, such as human admixed embryos, concern particular legislative proposals.

Overall this is an attractive and provocative book that shows well how theology can function in relation to bioethical issues. It should be useful both for theologians seeking to engage with bioethics and for secular bioethicists who may be tempted to dismiss the contribution of Christian theology to the discipline. This contribution will frequently be in reframing questions and by asking new questions. A striking example is Messer's extension of a thought-experiment that I once proposed in relation to admixed organisms: How would we respond to the successful birth of a human-chimpanzee hybrid? Messer pushes us further asking how we would respond were such a creature to ask us (echoing Acts 8.36) 'What is to prevent me from being baptised?' It might also be remarked that this question highlights a divergence among ecclesial communities, in that most, though not all, baptise infants and others incapable of *asking* for baptism. The point here is not that there is an obvious answer to the question of whether to baptise a human-chimpanzee hybrid, but rather, that the question gives concrete expression to the issue of status, dignity, and equality sometimes lacking in philosophical discussion.